

FOREWORD

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Oral History Interview

with

STEUART L. PITTMAN

September 18, 1970
Washington, D.C.

By William W. Moss

For the John F. Kennedy Library

MOSS: Let me ask you, first of all, Mr. Pittman, when, how and by whom were you approached for the job of Assistant Secretary of Defense for Civil Defense? What were the origins of your appointment in effect?

PITTMAN: Well, the principal answer to that is that when I got out of law school in 1948, I worked for Roswell Gilpatric at the New York law firm, Cravath, Swaine & Moore, and he was my first boss. As deputy secretary of defense, he asked me to do this. He was always very persuasive as far as I'm concerned. Adam Yarmolinsky, who worked for Gilpatric and was a key administration talent scout, thought that this was a special interest of mine because we were fellow members of a small "think group." I had once made a talk on civil resistance, and having only the notice and not attending, he reported to Gilpatric that I was an expert in civil defense, which I was not. That was the beginning.

MOSS: It was Gilpatric who contacted you, was it?

PITTMAN: Yes.

MOSS: Okay, when you came to talk to Gilpatric, what were the terms at which he put the job to you? What was on his mind and what was on yours?

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PITTMAN: It died hard because a lot of local civil defense plans were based on it. It was important to us that we convert local civil defense from evacuation to staying in place. You could move a certain distance, but nothing more than a half-hour, possibly an hour, namely, the time it takes for the explosion to occur and the fallout to travel and come down. But it is interesting that now evacuation is a hot subject again because of an assumption that there'll be a lot of crisis tension giving lead time. The Soviets have leaned heavily on this assumption. But even more interesting is that during the Cuban missile crisis--I don't think this has been reported anywhere that I've seen--President Kennedy personally--and it was only he who raised this--wanted answers from the Defense Department on civil defense measures that could be quickly made available if he was forced to dismantle the Cuban missile sites by force. The question was carefully framed in terms assuming a desperate response by [Fidel] Castro with conventional forces against Miami and the coast of Florida. Could we evacuate Miami before attacking the missile sites? I was brought into the meeting of this executive committee as a result of this question being raised. Both McNamara and Gilpatric were there, and when the question came up and I was supposed to talk about it the president, McNamara got up and left. He may have been uncomfortable. It was a rather impossible question on a subject not dear to his heart. I tried to persuade the president and others there that this would be a great mistake that not only the means to evacuate were uncertain, but we had avoided building an evacuation capability in the presence of a nuclear threat. To revert to evacuation at that time would create a disturbance around the nation. The public had been told by the president by television that Monday that if there's a response from Cuba, we'll treat it as a response from the Soviets. People all over the U.S. would expect the missiles to start flying; nobody could be sure that the missiles weren't yet operative in Cuba, with a range covering, say a third of the United States and better. So you would've had a hell of a mess on your hands if you tried to evacuate Miami and stop there. I used this question to get a decision at the president's level that we should move more rapidly to provide nationwide fallout shelter by lowering the standards for shelter in existing buildings. This decision was actually made just after the missile crisis cleared, but it stuck.

Of course, Rockefeller was banging on the door of the White House again, which provided an additional impetus. I remember sitting at my desk the day Khrushchev threw in the towel and the telephone rang. Darned if it wasn't President Kennedy saying, "This is the president. Rockefeller's coming in. What am I going to say to him? What are these measures that you were talking about at our meeting?" I had sent a memorandum over asking for approval of these measures and I said, "Have you seen my memorandum?" I heard him saying to Bundy,